

Theater

Unobstructed Vision

BY JIM RIDLEY

In her performance piece *Caged*, when **Estelle Condra** assumes the guise of a bird and leaps fearlessly across the stage, the actress says she often hears gasps from the audience. The gasps aren't just for the boldness of Condra's movements, however. Since her teenage years, when she studied performing arts in Johannesburg, Condra has been legally blind. There is likely an element of alarm as well as awe in her audience's reaction.

"There was a time I thought I would die if I couldn't perform," says Condra, who is also a writer, playwright, and accomplished storyteller. "I've learned that my range of movement is actually unlimited. We're all in cages; we just don't see ourselves that way."

Caged, which will be performed at the Montgomery Bell Academy Theatre this Sunday, is Condra's symbolic victory over retinitis pigmentosa, the disease that slowly robbed her of her sight from the time she was 4 years old. The disease, which destroys the cones and rods of the retina, is so rare that it was not diagnosed until late in Condra's adolescence. By that time, she had already settled on a life in the theater; she studied both in London and her native South Africa. When she arrived in Nashville some 15 years ago, she began to perform for school groups and local theater organizations.

Caged grew out of her work with the Governor's School at MTSU, for which she was asked to create a motivational piece about overcoming limitations. She was drawn repeatedly to the image of a bird imprisoned in a cage—an image, she says, that spoke to her strongly.

"I learned from a parrot I owned," says Condra, whose precise enunciation still bears traces of a South African accent. Although the parrot was thrilled to be let out of his cage every morning, she recalls, he did not let the bars stifle his spirit. "He flies, but he flies in place," she explains.

In *Caged*, Condra portrays some 12 different characters, among them a bird that becomes trapped in a cage after being nipped with scissors by "the sisters of fate." She also inhabits a number of human characters, including an African witch doctor and the British physician who first diagnosed her malady. Although the play is extremely cathartic, Condra notes, it is far from humorless.



Soaring Estelle Condra

"There is lots of laughter," she says with a lilt of girlish enthusiasm. "I have lots of fun onstage." Much of the play concerns her 23-year marriage to David Condra, "an old Nashville boy" whom she met in South Africa after he approached her and asked her to dance. "I've danced with him ever since," she adds.

To give herself freedom of movement onstage—and to keep her from fearing she'll leap off the stage or dash into a wall—Condra says she has developed a number of "tricks" that define the dimensions of her performance space. Near the edges of the stage, she places small tape recorders that emit white noise at low volume; whenever she hears them, she knows how much room she has. She also uses strategically placed electric fans, which create boundaries with air currents, and she wears special shoes with thin suede soles that allow her to feel marks on the floor. "I think the audience is glad I'm not going to fall in their laps," she jokes.

Condra hopes that the freedom she expresses onstage will encourage others with similar challenges. When she presented *Caged* at Atlanta's Cultural Paralympiad in August, she says she was upset to hear someone in the audience sobbing; afterward, she discovered the woman suffered from the same disease. But the woman may have drawn hope from the work as well. "When I break down the bars and soar free at the end, it's a triumph of the human spirit," Condra affirms. "I don't have to be inside my cage."

Sunday's performance will benefit Prevent Blindness Tennessee and the VITAL Center, which provides rehabilitation services to children and adults who experience vision loss due to injury, disease, or the aging process. The \$50 admission includes a reception at 4 p.m., with the play to follow. ■